

NEWSRELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Bus accident takes life of prison employee, injures others

One person was killed and 25 others injured when a bus carrying 26 Montana State Prison employees to work went off the road Friday morning on Interstate 90 near Warm Springs.

The victim was Sonja Ryan, 56, of Butte.

The westbound Tucker Transportation bus rolled about 5:30 a.m. after apparently striking a deer on the highway. The bus came to rest on its side in the median between the two lanes of the interstate. Several ambulances and two helicopters transported the injured passengers to hospitals in Anaconda, Butte, Deer Lodge and Missoula.

The extent of the injuries was not immediately known.

Existing staff at the prison stayed beyond their shift to ensure that all posts were covered and the facility is operating normally and securely, Warden Mike Mahoney said.

"We created this transportation program to improve safety and convenience for our employees and it has worked well," said Mike Ferriter, Department of Corrections director. "This is a terrible tragedy for all of us in corrections. Our hearts go out to the staff in the accident and to their families. They are in our thoughts and prayers."

"I want staff injured in the accident and their families to know my heartfelt concern for them at this difficult time," Mahoney said. "We are a family here and what affects some of us, affects all of us."

Mahoney expressed gratitude for the rapid response by law enforcement and medical personnel from Powell County and Anaconda-Deer Lodge County, as well as to staff from the prison infirmary and other prison employees driving to work who stopped to assist at the accident scene.

Ms. Ryan had worked for the state since 1981 when she was employed at Montana State Hospital as a psychiatric aide and later worked in the laundry. She transferred to the Montana Women's Prison in 1990 as a correctional officer and joined the Montana State Prison staff in 1994. For the past 13 years, she worked as administrative support in the records department.

(more)

The Montana Department of Corrections has contracted with the Butte-based bus company for about 19 months to transport Butte and Anaconda prison employees to and from the prison. The program, partly subsidized by the department, was an effort to help commuting employees cope with soaring fuel prices.

The bus company transports staff for all three shifts at the prison. The prison, located west of Deer Lodge, has about 1,380 inmates and 630 employees.

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